

Who Recalls New York's Old Fire Towers?

By FAIRFAX DOWNEY

THE other day in this town they went to Paul Revere's obliging friend one better. He hung only two lanterns in the belfry tower of the Old North Church, but in the fine new traffic tower at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street the police hung three lanterns—red, yellow and green—in an ornamental bronze cage as you could ask. There had been no such consequence that it could be mentioned in the same breath or paragraph with the belfry tower in the Old North Church in Boston.

Only a few days later the last of the old horses in greater New York answered the farewell alarm, and boys ran to the curb to watch them pass, as young ones of an earlier era must have watched

which, with their lamps and trees, were invisible. A rush of light from behind a towering black shadow in the northeast—that was the reflection of Union Square from behind the Domestic Building, at the corner of Fourteenth Street and Broadway; that triangle of light which seemed to burn in the sky far above all other buildings southward was the operating room of the Western Union Telegraph, and the two spheres, one seeming to float above the other, were the illuminated clocks of the City Hall and the Tribune Building. Down below us a broken wilderness of roofs reached out and the lights in the houses were gradually disappearing. 'They'll all be gone soon,' said the watchman; 'then it will get to be lonelier



The watchman from his lofty perch—it was 120 feet up from the street—cries "Fire!" with the bell below

eating steeds or the city's one fireboat charging out to it.

They stood, did those towers, in the days when New York rang a curfew at 9 o'clock. Owing to lack of facilities, the populace could not always be depended upon in those days to turn in alarms. Firemen had to be aggressive, going out to look for fires on patrols that lasted from 6 a. m. to 6 p. m. They were on duty day and night, with a holiday of twenty-four hours every fortnight, the only time married firemen could spend with their families. Ladies with ideas on wedlock like Fannie Hurst's must have married firemen in those days.

"Besides the street patrols," wrote Mr. Rideing, "watchmen are stationed in the bell towers during the day and night, keeping a constant lookout over the roofs for any sign of fire. It was formerly the custom to ring the bells when a fire was discovered as a warning to the neighborhood, but they are now used only in striking the curfew at 9 o'clock."

Let us visit one of the old fire towers as they were in 1877:

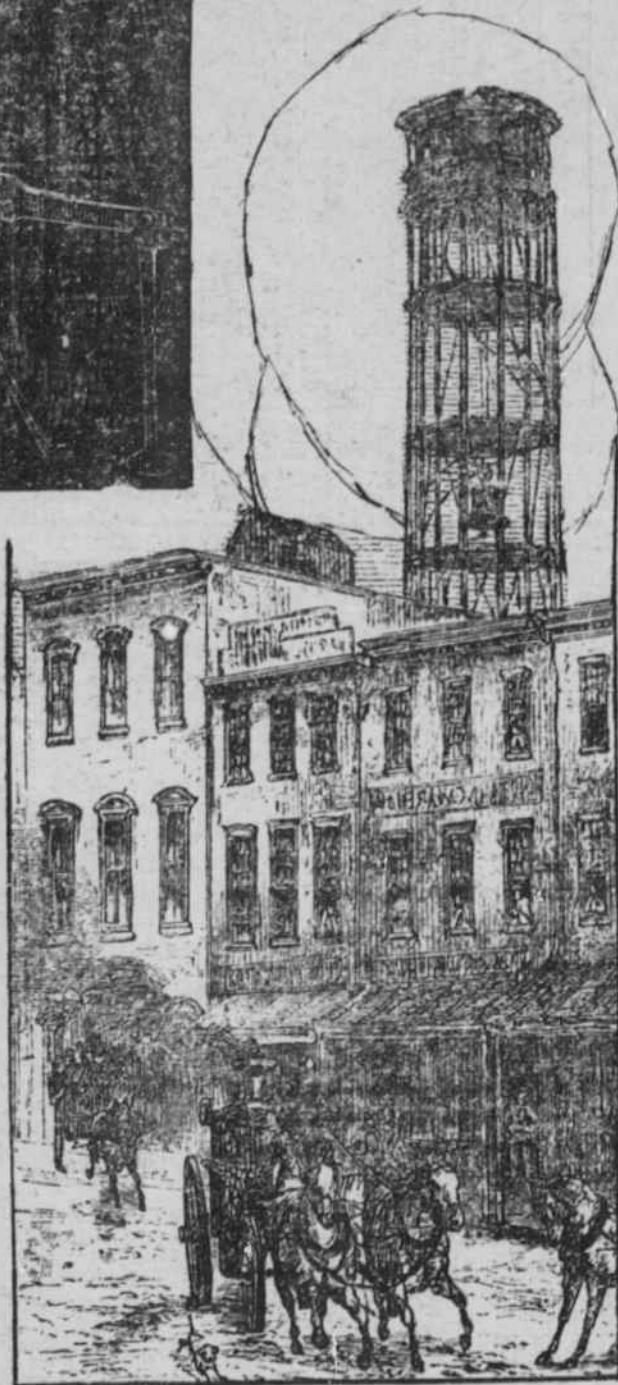
"A few minutes before 9 o'clock on a sultry evening last May the writer toiled up the spiral stairway of the tower at the corner of Spring and Varick streets and rapped at the trap door of a little octagonal house, built at a height of 120 feet from the ground on a set of iron pillars—a little house that aways and creaks in the wind like a bullrush. A voice answered and the door was raised to admit me into an apartment without lights and into the presence of the watchman, who

from his long and lonely vigils had become melancholy in voice and manner. A chair, a table and a spittoon comprised the furniture. A circular window afforded an outlook in every direction. A somewhat harsh clock rasped out the seconds and the watchman made the circuit of the room with a preoccupied air. By and by the tinkle of a sweet-toned bell revealed a telegraph apparatus put up against the slight wall. 'Nine o'clock sent from headquarters,' the watchman explained, and forthwith he raised and depressed a lever like that of a marine engine, and in response the great bell below the floor tolled out nine strokes with long, moaning intervals.

All the sorrows of the city below us seemed to take voice in the dying reverberations of that bell, and when the last audible hum had expired the watchman seemed relieved and was more disposed to talk, though he continued his perambulation of the room, occasionally bending forward and staring intently in some direction where a stronger flare than usual indicated the possibility of a fire.

"The night was moist and hazy. The blackness of the overcast sky was modified by the thin gray mist and by the long rows of street lamps in the principal avenues, which resembled luminous beads strung together with scarcely any space between. Where the buildings intervened and hid the lamps themselves the streets could be traced by the golden reflections which banded the surrounding gray and black, and in the same way a broader space of yellow marked the public squares,

The tower of forty-five years ago, when its bell and watchman were a vital link in New York's fire system



Towers now are part of the police regime. Here is the new traffic regulator at Fifth Ave. and 42d St.

engines dragged by volunteer firemen rattle along to their final call.

The erection of the bronze tower, a permanent decorative monument of the city and probably the forerunner of a system of extensive light-synchronized control of traffic, reforges a link with the past which would have been snapped when the veteran fire horses galloped into honorable retirement. Perhaps the plain policeman in the fancy tower could not tell you of that link and his blue-coated predecessors that formed it. But more than likely not.

One must have recourse to the words of William H. Rideing, who in October, 1877, wrote in "Harper's New Monthly Magazine" of the fire towers of New York—of towers manned by fire watchmen, who swept the city and rivers with their binoculars, ready to ring an alarm of "One (or whatever it was) if by land, and two if by sea" and send the smoke-

up here. Looking westward, I could discern a space blacker than the rest, which shook gently and glinted. This was the Hudson River, and the fringe of lamps outlined the water front of Jersey City."

Watchmen were aided by binocular glasses, which "elucidated" much that otherwise would have escaped the naked eye. Also an electric connection between towers enabled any watchman who saw a suspicious light within his radius of vision to warn the occupants of the other towers to be on the alert to spot a fire. It was considered a feat in fire spotting when a watchman located an incipient fire more than a mile away from his tower.

By 1877 it was estimated that the eight fire towers almost had outlasted their usefulness. And now in 1922 the fire horses have trotted from their stalls and into their harness to their last gong, joining the towers in limbo.